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AUTHOR Roberts, C. Janene
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ABSTRACT

Frame analysis is an approach to social situations that can be applied profitably to literature and performance. A frame is the reality status of a situation; keys are the characteristics that define a frame. Most literary works are keying on real life frameworks. Literary works that are based on other literary works, such as parodies, are rekeyings, just as a performance of literature is a rekeying of the text from the print medium to the stage. Frame analysis can facilitate that transformation by identifying the frames of a text and the keys that define them. It is essential that a performance of literature establish through staging, lighting, performance style, and other keys the same frames (or close analogues) that are presented in the literary text, thereby telling the audience in what kind of world or state of mind the action is occurring. A brief frame analysis of John Barth's short story "Menelaiad" reveals some of the characteristics of the story's complex framing that would have to be translated into performance. Performing "Menelaiad" would require communicating not only the opposition of firm, clear frames, but also the surprise, doubt, and ambiguity produced by overlapping frames and doubt-casting keys. The performance would also need to convey the sense of spirited fun, experimental daring, and "savoir faire" that characterize the overall framework of "Menelaiad." (RL)

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C. Janene Roberts

1307 Norwalk Lane
Apt. 210
Austin, Texas 78703

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A Frame Analysis of Barth's "Menelaiad"

Frame analysis is an approach to social situations which can be applied profitably to literature and performance. A frame is the reality status of a situation; keys are the characteristics that define a frame. Performers of literature can benefit from thinking of staging a performance in terms of keying frames. The purpose of this paper is to explain frame analysis and apply it to a short story, pointing out implications for performance.

CS 503 213

A Frame Analysis of Barth's "Menelaiad"

Erving Goffman's frame analysis[1] is a phenomenological approach to the study of social activity, dealing with the ways situations are defined and organized. Literature and performance are both special kinds of social situations, or "frames." The purpose of this paper is to explain frame analysis and to apply it to a work of literature.

Frames and Keys

In everyday life, there are many different kinds of situations (frames), each having its own set of contents, purposes, spatial and temporal boundaries (called brackets), ground rules and conventions that define the frame and set it apart from all others. The total of all of the characteristics that define a frame is called the "key." For greater specificity, however, I will use the term in the singular sense as well, to apply to one particular characteristic among the many that define the frame.

Primary Frameworks and Keyings

Goffman differentiates "primary frameworks," which are "real" or "literal" occurrences that can be taken at face value—e.g., classes, jobs, parties, dates—from "keyings," which have some appearance of "reality" but are non-literal in meaning—e.g., play, jokes, deceptions, dreams, self-delusions, contests, theatrical events, literature. A keying is an imitation or transformation of a primary framework. The ways in which the keying alters the primary framework and indicates what non-literal frame should be

applied to the situation comprise the key. A wrestling match, for instance, is a keying of an actual fight (primary framework). The elevated, roped-in ring, the wrestlers' standard attire, the presence of referees and the rules of the match are some of the keys used to distinguish the contest from a "real" fight.

In the sense that they are not quite as straight-forward and "real" as primary frameworks, keyings are illusions of reality, which, to various extents, must be believed in order to exist. In play, jokes, contests, theatrical events and literature, the participants' belief is voluntary, temporary and highly qualified (a kind of make-believe). But in deceptions, dreams and self-delusions, the illusion of reality may seem, to the main participants at least, very real indeed. One of the basic tenets of frame analysis is that people have a strong psychological need to know what is going on, i.e., what frame they should apply to a situation and to what degree they should believe and get involved in it.

Breaking Frames

The relatively unreal status of keyings makes them breakable, that is, vulnerable to being discredited or abruptly discontinued. A frame break is caused by an inconsistency in the keying or by the intrusion of another, more compelling frame. A dreamer may wake up; a liar may expose himself with an inconsistency in his story; an actor may forget his lines and drop character, temporarily dispelling the illusion of the play.

Rekeyings and Laminations

Just as a primary framework can be keyed, transformed into an activity with another meaning, it is possible to rekey a keying, to further transform an already transformed activity into a frame with yet another meaning. For example, the wrestling match, which is a keying, may be rekeyed, as when professional wrestlers stage a wrestling match so that it appears to be a legitimate contest but actually has a predetermined outcome and fake injuries. The wrestlers may rekey the match even further if they start playing at faking the match, exaggerating their false holds to make them look false, perhaps for satirical purposes. Rekeying can occur almost ad infinitum. Each additional rekeying of the same activity is called a "lamination." The outermost lamination, or the rim of the frame, "tells us just what sort of status in the real world the activity has."[2]

Literature and Performance

Most literary works are keyings, based, however loosely, on real life primary frameworks. Literary works, such as parodies, that are based on other literary works, are rekeyings. A performance of literature is a rekeying, a transformation of the world of the text from the medium of print to that of the stage. Frame analysis can facilitate that transformation by helping the director/performer identify the frame(s) of a text and the keys that define it (them).

Within the outer rim of a literary text, a number of different frames may be used to convey the work's content. A single-

frame work, especially one that aims to be realistic, like Gone With the Wind, offers no challenge for frame analysis, because all of its depicted activity occurs on the same plane of "reality," a world whose appearance, rules and boundaries closely resemble those of our own real-life world. Frame analysis is best applied to works with more complex framing, those that manipulate the reader's consciousness by employing madness, deceptions, dream sequences, flashbacks, fantasies, stories-within-stories and other keyings to vary the texture of the works' fictional "reality."

Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire, a parodic novel disguised as a commentary written by a madman, is an example of a work of extremely complex framing. Nabokov leads the reader through a maze of frames (novel, parody, commentary, poem, fantasy, self-delusion, deception, dream and, finally, "reality") that ultimately brings into question the very meaning of "reality."

It is essential that a performance of literature establish, with staging, lighting, performance style and other keys, the same frames (or close analogues) that are presented in the literary text. Framing is a metacommunicative dimension of the literary experience, going beyond who, what, when, where, why and how to tell the audience in what kind of world or state of mind the action is occurring. This dimension must be translated into performance.

A Frame Analysis of "Menelaiad"

Complex and confusing framing is the organizing principle of John Barth's experimental short story, "Menelaiad." Rekeying

Homer's Odyssey, Book IV, in which Menelaus tells his visitor, Telemachus, the story of his journey home from the Trojan War, "Menelaiad" takes to the point of absurdity the story-within-a-story narrative technique commonly used in literature. The result is a tale seven laminations deep.

Each lamination (or frame) is a separate story, with a unique time, setting, plot and cast of characters. The seven stories interlock in that they are told by the same narrator and that the main character of each story becomes the listener of the next. Barth keys these seven frames with spacial divisions and numbers indicating separate sections. Barth further keys these frames by following the standard procedure of enclosing each lamination in alternating double and single quotation marks, e.g.: "'"'Got you!' I cried" I cried' I cried" I cry (p. 141).[3] Thus, the sequence of quotation marks on each side of the comment should indicate precisely which frame is being presented. However, as the tale progresses, the lines of quotation marks grow to an unwieldy length and frequently subdivide themselves within paragraphs as characters from various frames interrupt the story currently being told:

> "'"'"In the horse's bowel,"'"'" I groan, "'"'"we grunt till midnight, Laocoon's spear still stuck in our gut..."'" "Hold up," said Helen; "'Off,' said Proteus; "On," said his web-foot daughter.'" You see what my spot was, boys!...' (p. 149)

Barraged with these rapid transitions from frame to frame, one soon begins to suspect that Barth's perfectly correct use of punctuation is really an insidious plot to confuse the reader disguised as a helpful keying device.

Overlapping Frames

Barth further confuses the reader's perception of seven discrete frames by overlapping the stories. There are moments, for example, when the listeners in all of the laminations come together and speak in unison—e.g., "'("'(('(("'Well. . .'"))'))"' (p. 157)—or with so many similar responses that it is barely possible and quite unnecessary to distinguish them individually, e.g.:

> "'"'"'He asked Prince Paris—' 'You didn't!'" "By Zeus!"' 'By Zeus!'" "You didn't!"' 'Did you really?'" "By Zeus," I tell me I told all except point Helen, "I did. (p. 157)

In these instances, it seems as though all the characters separated by time, space and the boundaries of storytelling have momentarily converged within the same frame, an apparent violation of frame brackets (frame break) that charms and surprises as it confuses the reader. Of course, these voices appear to be responding together only because they are placed together on the page. They still remain within their appropriate quoation marks, indicating that they may be responding to what Menelaus is telling them within the properly independent contexts of their designated times and places. As with his use of quotation marks, Barth's frenetic frisking among frames is overwhelming to behold but well within the rules of framing.

In other cases, however, characters actually reach out of their frames, circumventing the time bracket by commenting upon stories which, chronologically, have not yet occurred. Barth is toying with the reader's automatic framing responses. He sets up

fictitious frames (the seven stories) and teaches the reader to believe in them and to perceive their brackets as impenetrable boundaries. He then makes his characters skip over those mighty walls as if they were cracks in the sidewalk.

Doubt-Casting Keys

In addition to the jumbling and overlapping of frames, Barth tampers with the reader's perceptions in other ways. He has devised a number of keys that gnaw at the reader's confidence in the credibility of each frame. The main issue that arises from these accumulated doubts is whether or not Menelaus is a reliable narrator. He seems to be trying very hard to tell the story as it really happened—I tell it as it is (p. 132)—but there are many obstacles in the way of the truth. In Story 2, Menelaus has been drinking quite a lot. Casting further doubt on Menelaus's narrative competency, Helen (as she does in the Odyssey) puts a spirit-lifting drug in the wine. In Story 4, the mermaid Eidothea gives Menelaus ambrosia:

> "I smelled a trick...Even so I nearly lost my grip. Was I back in the horse? Was I dreaming of Helen on my bachelor throne?"
>
> (p. 140)

When Menelaus struggles with Proteus in Story 4, Proteus changes form to confuse him. Menelaus is a solipsist anyway, unsure of everything except his own existence. Proteus's trick works so well that Menelaus begins to doubt even his own identity. After this encounter with Proteus, Menelaus never quite recovers his confidence in "reality." Throughout the laminations, he reverts to wondering who he is and whether he might be dreaming.

All of these factors cast some doubt upon Menelaus's reliability, but without definite evidence that Menelaus is incompetent or lying or dreaming or mad, these hints leave the reader stranded between belief and disbelief.

In the end, Menelaus announces that he is not, in fact, Menelaus, that Proteus turned into Menelaus on the beach at Pharos and that Menelaus is merely a voice eternally telling its tale. This final revelation, again, does not fully discredit the stories Menelaus has told, it merely puts his identity and relationships into a new perspective.

The effect of all of these doubt-casting keys is to instill in the reader an inclination to believe whatever Menelaus says, despite everything, and in the course of gaining this reliance, to develop a high tolerance for ambiguity and confusion.

Relationship of Framing to Theme

The ultimate effect of Barth's complex framing in "Menelaiad" is a correspondence between the frame structure and the theme of the story—a seamless merger of form and content.

In Barth's story, Menelaus is the epitome of modern man; he doubts everything, even himself, and seeks a rational explanation for all phenomena. He is painfully out of place in the Homeric world, where such things as form-changing gods are common occurrences. Menelaus's main problem is that he is married to Helen of Troy, the embodiment of Mystery. He repeatedly asks her to explain why she married him. She replies "Love." But Love is not a rational explanation, so Menelaus cannot accept that answer.

In the course of his confusing troubles, Menelaus finally realizes that Reason is useless in his world, so he abandons himself to Irrationality and Love; and his problems are solved. The reader accompanies Menelaus in his mental journey from Reason, through Doubt and Confusion, to acceptance of Irrationality and Love. The frame structure of "Menelaiad" produces essentially the same effect on the reader as Menelaus's troubles produce on him. The well-defined frames satisfy the reader's rational expectations of clarity and consistency, even in a fictitious world. Then the overlapping frames and doubt-casting keys gradually undermine the security of those clear and separate laminations. The reader, along with Menelaus, is afloat in a world of impossible happenings and never-ending doubt. Only when Menelaus abandons rational inquiry and accepts Love is he saved:

> "The senseless answer to our riddle woo, mad history's secret, base-fact and footer to the fiction crazy-house our life: imp-slayer love, terrific as the sun! Love! Love!
>
> (p. 165)

At this climactic moment, the reader does not care whether this story "really" happened, whether Menelaus is drunk, or drugged, or ambrosia-mad, or dreaming, or confused, or Proteus. Whatever its frame, its reality status, Barth has given the reader, and Menelaus, something transcendently real: Love.

A Performance of "Menelaiad"

This brief frame analysis of "Menelaiad" reveals some of the characteristics of the story's framing that would have to be translated into performance. Complex framing is not a frill in "Menelaiad;"

it is the essence of the story. A performance of "Menelaiad" would have to communicate the dynamic opposition of firm, clear frames, on one hand, and the surprise, doubt and ambiguity produced by frame breaks, overlapping frames and doubt-casting keys, on the other. The performance would also need to convey the sense of spirited fun, experimental daring and savior faire that characterizes the overall frame of "Menelaiad."

ENDNOTES

[1]Erving Goffman, Frame Analysis (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974).

[2]Goffman, p. 82.

[3]All citations refer to "Menelaiad" in John Barth, Lost in the Funhouse (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968).